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## A HIGH-SCHOOL COURSE IN PUBLIC SPEAKING<sup>1</sup>

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My contribution to the discussion of this subject will consist merely in an account of what I have found it possible to accomplish in a high-school course in public speaking which I am giving for the second time in the high school at Mt. Clemens, Michigan.

Since we are training for citizenship in a republic where the question of effective speaking must always be a vital one, I regard work of this kind as the English teacher's greatest opportunity to satisfy the modern demand for practicality. I believe, also, that we ought to be able to spare one semester of the four years' English course for the continuous practice of the art. The fashionable observance of Friday as public-speaking day is not, in my opinion, sufficient, for instruction or practice in any activity given only once a week lacks the vitality and loses the interest that arises from sustained and continuous effort. The course which will be here outlined was given to third-year students who had completed at least two semesters of composition work. The sections contained not more than twenty-five students each.

I started the work with a fervent prayer that I might be delivered from all desire for vain show in the way of contests, declamations, elocution, etc. My purpose was to train in the most effective way the largest number, giving the most drill to the weak. I turned my back on the possibility of training a star or two to go forth to win laurels for himself or for me. I did not even plan to arouse enthusiasm of the school by coaching a winning debating team, but only to give drill in plain, simple speaking, which the man of today needs, and the woman of tomorrow will need more than rules for the use of the comma.

At the beginning of the course, each student committed to memory a declamation which he selected from a list prepared by

<sup>1</sup>Read before the Public Speaking Section of the National Council of Teachers of English, November 29, 1912.

the teacher. He repeated to the class the circumstances under which the speech was delivered, gave his diagnosis of the emotional situation, and told briefly how he expected to deliver it. The members of the class listened, criticized, and suggested. I looked forward with considerable interest to the day when the first declamations were to be given. If the course was to be a success, each speaker must feel the presence of an audience, and I wondered whether the presence of his acquaintances and friends in the class would be sufficient. I found that by the introduction of a few elements of formality, such as the announcement of the speaker, and his standing in the front of the room, each speaker felt a sufficient significance in the situation to put him upon his mettle. The first day, each member of the class gave in writing the best thing that in his judgment could be said of the work by each of the six speakers. These were handed in at the desk and were later given by the teacher to the speakers of the hour to peruse as a reward for their effort and as encouragement for the future. The next day, we ranked each speaker with reference to his intelligent use of the voice and tabulated the results upon the blackboard. At another class hour, we had a declamation contest, the members of the class acting as judges. These various devices made it necessary for the listeners to be thinking all the time in a critical way on the essential points in effective speaking.

Our next series of exercises included the making-out of an outline for a three-minute talk on some current question and, after the outline was approved, working up the material and delivering the speech. The speaker might, if he desired, use notes jotted down upon a slip of paper which could be held in the hand. This last restriction caused some little amusement, for the members of the class felt that one of their number, a young giant, had a considerable advantage over the others. Outlines were handed in, dealing with such subjects as these: "The Need for a New Gymnasium"; "A One Session Day"; "The Unfairness of the Present Examination System." We went over together in the class hour many of the outlines, criticizing arrangement of material with reference to the principles of coherence and emphasis, as well as making suggestions as to new material. The remainder were read

by the teacher and returned with suggestions. I feared that since familiarity is said to breed contempt, this second occasion might not seem so momentous as the first, but it was noised about the school that speeches were to be delivered on the need for a new gymnasium (a very vital question) and I was besieged by students begging to visit the class. I gave permission to a sufficient number to fill my room and found my students provided with an audience. Again we listened, compared, criticized, and appreciated.

We repeated this exercise, discussing another topic without the use of notes. Following this, each student prepared to give an oral narration of some incident in his experience or to retell a short story. If he chose to do the latter, he gave in advance the title and author and had his selection approved. This work occasioned, as a by-product, a new interest in magazine literature. Then we tried oral exposition, and students reported upon activities carried on in the city—the making of beet sugar, for example.

The young people probably enjoyed most the next three weeks' work. For several days, they told informally in class the funniest short stories of the after-dinner type that they had ever heard. It was explained that the point must be carefully treasured until the time was ripe for its disclosure, then be brought out clearly and emphatically. Every student sought to find his most effective tone and manner, recognizing that one person's laughter at his own jokes may be infectious while that of another is silly.

After this sort of preparation, we attempted the after-dinner speech. First, we imagined ourselves preparing for the banquet which the members of the class would give to the Seniors at the end of the year. One student presided as toastmaster, while others took the part of Seniors responding to the welcome proffered, and giving over various privileges to the oncoming class. Again visitors' seats were at a premium; several boys asked to be excused from speaking until their first long trousers were finished, and I felt sure there was a distinct consciousness of the significance of the occasion. We followed this "banquet" by various other imaginary festivals. The memory of one of these occasions will always be a source of amusement to me. The most distinguished guest whom we entertained stepped in, to find a self-possessed youth in short

trousers presiding at the desk. One would have supposed from his language that he was introducing a distinguished lawyer. The look of perplexity upon our visitor's face deepened when the speaker so fluently introduced proved to be an overgrown boy of sixteen, who proceeded to recount reminiscences which he placed twenty years back. I was seated among the students, enjoying with them a reunion of their class held in the year 1931.

For the sake of variety, programs were several times given in the presence of visitors. The planning for such an occasion and the assignment of parts were turned over to some one student, who presided. For instance, one boy, this fall, planned a very profitable hour of discussion of the subject, "What Our City Needs," various subtopics being given out to his friends for discussion. Another boy announced a rally of the Democratic party, at which various students speaking as candidates for the different county offices explained why they would appreciate our votes at the polls.

The last third of our course included a study of the laws governing deliberative bodies. We used as a text a most admirable book, Gregg's *Parliamentary Law*, published by Ginn & Co. This gives a simple, accurate, and very clever treatment of the most difficult questions. Our method was almost entirely that of practice. We studied about each type of motion first and then used it. I found that the boys in the class, especially, regarded this study as a peculiarly interesting competitive game. They became such expert players that the slightest infringement upon the rules of the game was sure to be detected by some alert youth, who would utter in a sonorous tone the thrilling words: "I rise to a point of order." Almost every parliamentary situation was met, often with amusing results. On one occasion, the smallest boy in the room purposely became unruly so that the chairman would give orders that he be removed from the room by the sergeant-at-arms, who happened, at that time, to be the biggest boy in the class. I found that the general trend of the practice meeting was often planned out in advance to bring about funny situations. This pleased me greatly, for it meant that the young people were thinking. The boys in the class became so efficient that many of them, I feel sure, could hold their own in a very disorderly assembly. All that we attempted

in oral argumentation was done in connection with debate on a question before the house.

I wish to sum up very briefly the results of the course so far as they are now evident. Five months later, these same young people took a very active part in the festivities of commencement week. It was a matter of common remark among their teachers and friends that they acquitted themselves with an unusual degree of self-possession, that they were witty and intelligent beyond all expectation.

In the second place, no speaker of any note has appeared in the city whose delivery has not been subjected to the most searching criticism by the members of my class. Not only this, but many of my students take especial pains to hear many speakers on various subjects because they enjoy feeling that they are able to criticize or to appreciate them.

The members of the class have given "entirely unsolicited testimonials" to the interest and value of the course. Six boys, individually, volunteered to me the information that they never had taken much interest in any English course before but they had liked the work we had done in oral English. From three to six teachers of English had experimented upon these boys; so it seemed fair to assume that their preference for public speaking was due rather to the material used than to the uniform stupidity of their reading and theme courses. A number of others, whom I did not count, told me how much the course had helped them in their other work, recitations in history and demonstrations of propositions in geometry being mentioned.